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ABSTRACT

Noting that care of children has not often been investigated from the perspective of the child, this study examined children's views on "care." Participating in the survey study were 941 children, ages 10 to 12 years, (592 in their first year of secondary school and 349 in their last year of primary school). Participants were drawn from 12 state schools in 2 South London local authorities. A case study sample of 63 children was selected from the survey sample, drawn equally from three family types: mother-only, mother and stepfather, and two-parent households. A separate sample of foster children was also included. The survey and case study samples were disproportionately working class families. The main findings of the research indicated that children thought they should be the care priority for their parents. Love and care were considered more important to children than family structure. Children believed that mothers and fathers should be equally involved in and responsible for child care. Children disliked family change such as separation and divorce, but were pragmatic and even optimistic about settling into new family structures/routines. Some children maintained affectionate relationships and regular contact with nonresident parents. Stepparents had to earn respect and affection as new parent figures, but gained points for making the birth parent happy. Siblings were the most significant people in children's lives after parents, followed by grandparents, blood-related uncles and aunts, friends, and some professionals, of which "helpful teachers" were most frequently nominated. Children believed childhood should be a protected and free time. (KB)

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Care and Family Life in Later Childhood

Julia Brannen, Ellen Heptinstall
& Kalwant Bhopal

A project funded by the Department of Health 1996 - 1999

Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London

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Introduction

Care has not often been investigated from the perspective of the child. This study approached the subject by regarding children as individuals in their own right, who are attempting to make sense of the care they receive from parents from their own moral and experiential viewpoints. Being the main recipients of care in the family environment, their view of how they are treated is fundamental to our understanding of that care. Nor do children simply receive care without returning it to other family members. They are contributors of care within the household, holding what are often strong views which are influenced by outside forces, not least prevailing societal attitudes to family norms. The children taking part in this study were encouraged to give their views on 'care' which was interpreted broadly to include the moral, social and practical aspects. They were also questioned about their views concerning the desirability of particular family forms and cultural interpretations of parenthood and childhood.

The study[1] was funded by the Department of Health and was carried out at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London between 1996 and 1999. The study drew upon a community sample of 941children aged 10 to 12 who were starting (state) secondary school in two South London Local Authorities. This is a time of major transition when care in families may be paramount. The sample included children from every type of family background - two parent households, lone-mother households, step-families and foster care. The sample also represented children from several significant minority ethnic groups, with half of the children being from Black, South Asian or mixed race backgrounds.

Study aims:

The study's main aims were to examine:

- Children's understandings of care as 'caring about', 'caring for' and as integral to social relationships.
- Children's moral or normative views of care (the 'right thing to do') in different contexts.
- Children's own contribution to care and to family life.
- Children's accounts of family change and the importance to them of their resident and non-resident families of origin and their current carers.
- The family networks of children living in different family forms.
- The importance and support of social ties within the household and also including relatives, friends and professionals.
- Foster children's views and experiences of foster care
- Children's reports and views of their care compared with those of their parents and carers.

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[1] Brannen, J, Heptinstall, E and Bhopal, K (2000) *Connecting Children: Care and Family Life in Later Childhood*, London: RoutledgeFalmer

- Children's autonomy outside the home and in their everyday lives at the start of secondary school.

Research design and methods

To explore these aims, the following three-stage research design was chosen. In the first stage, a questionnaire survey of 941 children, either in their last year of primary school or their first year of secondary school, was carried out in twelve London schools in two local authorities. The survey provided an overview of children's views of family life and information upon which to select children living in different family types. In the second stage, focus groups were conducted with children in schools in order to develop the interview schedule for the third stage based upon children's own ideas. In the third stage, 63 children and their mothers and foster carers were interviewed separately about their views and experiences of giving and receiving care. These were selected from the survey according to three types of family form – two-parent families, lone-mother families and step-families. A group of foster children was accessed via local authority social services departments. (See Appendix for further details)

Executive Summary

This study provides the first full account of children's understanding of care and their perspectives on family life which is based on a community population of children and includes a group of children in foster care. This study was carried out with children during their transition to secondary school in two London local authorities. It provides both extensive and intensive analyses of children's views and experiences of care: care as a moral imperative or duty; care as 'caring about' other people; care as 'caring for' others; and care as a relationship in which care is given as well as received.

Below is a summary of the main findings of the research:

- **Children think they should be the care priority for their parents and within their families**
- **Children are inclusive in their views of what constitutes a family**
- **Love and care are more important to children than family structure**
- **Children see parents as those who give them unconditional love, and in return offer them immense loyalty and emotional support**
- **Children believe that mothers and fathers should be equally involved in and responsible for caring for their children**
- **Children dislike family change (such as separation and divorce), but are pragmatic and even optimistic about settling into new family structures and routines**
- **Some children maintained affectionate relationships and regular contact with non-resident parents; those who felt absent parents were 'no longer there for them' felt resentful**
- **Step-parents had to earn respect and affection as new parent figures, but gained points for making the children's birth parents happy**
- **Siblings were the most significant people in children's lives after parents, followed by grandparents - especially grandmothers - blood-related uncles and aunts, friends and some professionals, of which 'helpful teachers' were most frequently nominated**
- **Children in two-parent families have more friends than children living with lone-parents**

- **Children believe childhood should be a protected and free time, where they should be allowed to get on with their homework and not do too much housework or other 'adult' work**

- **Children give as well as receive care, both to their parents - for whom they want to 'be there' - and siblings, friends, older relatives and pets**

- **Children's attitudes to parental control match those of their parents: in general, directive parents have compliant children and negotiative parents have negotiative children**

1. Children's views of the 'proper way to care'

Care is an expression of moral commitment that requires people to behave towards one another in caring ways *(Brannen et al 2000)*[2]

Filled with a strong sense of what the 'proper thing to do' is, children showed that they are actively morally aware even if they emphasise that they may not always practise what they preach. This applies outside as well as within the family, and was manifest in the consensus of responses from the children to vignettes of hypothetical, typical situations.

Outside the home

The first vignette was set in a school playground showing one girl isolated from the peer group. There was widespread agreement that the child should be comforted and included, but many also hinted that in reality she was likely to face some bullying or simply be ignored. The children raised possible reasons for not acting in a caring way towards the outsider, for instance the child's possible 'difference' from others and peer group culture.

'It depends on what they're like. They could be, like, bullies and saying, let's go and pick on her. Or, they could be saying "Oh! Gosh, why is that girl crying? Let's go over and talk to her"' *(Chloe, black girl)*

The second vignette pictured adults pushing in front of two children ready to pay for their purchases in a shop. They agreed that adults often treated them as if they were second class citizens in public places, and that this was unfair when they were equally customers.

'Just because they're older than us, they think we can't stick up for ourselves' *(Latasha, black girl).*

In the family

Children all felt that in the home, family life should be centred on children's needs. They considered it a fact and appropriate that they should be the parents' first priority. Parents needed to 'be there for them' when they arrived home from school rather than working long hours. An almost equal number of boys and girls in the survey thought they would work part-time when they were grown up in order to make time for younger children especially. Though feeling obliged to help when necessary, the children felt that their homework must come first. Two thirds of the survey children thought they should help a little or give 'some help' and two thirds reported making a modest contribution to household work. Those views also

2. Brannen, J, Heptinstall, E and Bhopal, K (2000) *Connecting Children: Care and Family Life in Later Childhood*, London: RoutledgeFalmer

emerged when reacting to a third vignette showing two hard-working parents in a family run shop.

'I think she (daughter) should do her homework first and then help them.' *(Serena, black girl)*

Children said that at least one of the parents should stop working when they got home from school to help them with their homework. Also, it was seen as important that schoolwork was the work children *should* be doing and it should come before any household or commercial contributions (for instance helping in the family shop).

'We've got the chance to make somebody clever, let's not ruin it.' *(Niaz, South Asian origin boy)*

Gender-free parenting

Social messages about equality in parenting appear to have had an impact on children. Their views on how parenting 'ought' to be done suggest that children see parenting as a gender-free activity. Four fifths of the survey children agreed that mothers and fathers should be equally, or interchangeably, involved in different parenting tasks and household work. However, their reported experience shows that, in practice, mothers are more involved in everyday childcare. Though children were often very careful not to make comparative judgements between their two parents, it also came across from some children that mothers fulfilled their emotional needs more than fathers did.

'Mothers understand their children more and fathers, they've got to go to work and everything' *(Rebecca, white girl).*

'Fathers are strict... they're not the best for understanding, loving. Mothers, they know how to nourish and love. They know what's best for children.' *(Zarina, South Asian origin girl)*

Family change

Children were, not surprisingly, averse to traumatic family change. Half the survey children (44%) thought parents should talk over their problems, and 28% thought parents should separate temporarily before giving the relationship a second chance. When shown a fourth vignette depicting argumentative parents, the majority of children said that the departing father should not leave the family. They all emphasised the negative impact of his departure on the child. However, despite expressing sadness and some disapproval of family breakdown, they were pragmatic in suggesting that things would start to get better. One boy living with his mother said ***'When I first didn't see my dad I was upset, but now I don't mind because I'm still seeing him'*** *(Willy, white boy).*

Nearly three quarters of survey children thought they should have a say in their parents' divorce and, similarly, about living arrangements after divorce. The most important factor was that of care. Children wanted to live with the parent who had previously been the most caring, especially in terms of everyday availability.

Children's views of families and parents

'If you get love, then you're a family. But if you get nothing what's the point of having a mother and a father?' *(Inderpal, South Asian origin boy).*

Family structure and family practice

Children's accounts show that love and care are far more important to them than family structure. Most children held broadly inclusive ideas of what constituted a family, including lone parenthood and stepfamilies. Similarly, they were generally critical of any prescriptive ideas of what a family should look like. However, the idea that ***'The child makes the family'*** *(Baldev, South Asian origin boy)* was a very popular one. A childless couple did not, they felt, constitute a 'proper family' but a 'family in waiting'.

Generally those who lived either with lone-mothers or in step-families were more open-minded about family structure than those who lived with both parents or in foster families. Whilst the children's criteria for family life were the presence of a child(ren) and at least one parent in the household, even more important was the practice of family life: making children feel secure, giving them a sense of belonging and, most important of all, providing them with unconditional love and care.

'All a family needs is love... Say you're on you're own and one parent, you still get love, that's still a family' *(Inderpal, South Asian origin boy).*

Parents

'[Parents are] people that never ever don't care about you.'

Children's birth parents were of great importance to them irrespective of what household form they lived in. The most frequently emphasised quality was that of love and affection. Indeed, other fundamental issues such as discipline and setting boundaries, were generally understated by children in their estimation of their parents. It was foster children, though, having experienced the least continuity in parenting who placed the most importance on parents in children's lives.

No matter what the past or current experience of family life, children showed enormous loyalty to their birth parents. Children repeatedly stated that their parents should be there for them and that they should be their parents' first priority. Even when they failed them, children were reluctant to say anything negative about their parents and were keen not to make value judgements between them even when (according to mothers' reports) they were disappointed in their non-resident fathers' interest in them.

2. Children's views of parents through family change

The study sought also to examine the processes which affect children during periods of family change. Though many of the children had been too young to remember the impact it had, those who had experienced it more recently often gave in depth accounts of the divorce or separation and their feelings connected to it. This was especially true of those children who had not been expecting it and had been unprepared. Many emphasised their own vulnerability and sensitivity at the time and some gave accounts suggesting that they felt a strong sense of powerlessness.

'I knew what was happening, because... because they kept on arguing all the time and I thought "One of these days he's going to walk out" and he did'. *(Claudia, mixed race girl, lone parent)*

'He got his jacket and walked out in the middle of the day. I was crying and shouting 'Where are you going?' He were looking back to look at us and he was just going like that with his hand, like, as if to [say] 'go back in''. *(Liam, white boy in foster care)*

Other children were reluctant to elaborate upon or even to mention family change, while others simply claimed not to remember. The children's silence and reticence in response to these questions about their experiences of their parents splitting up left room for researcher interpretation. As found in other areas of their interviews, many children were reluctant to criticise their parents or blame them openly. Mothers helped to fill the gaps in children's accounts of family change. However, mothers concentrated on their own role in giving children support than on children's ways of dealing with it.

Departing fathers and stepfathers moving in

There was a wide variety of responses to non-resident fathers. Some children continued to maintain an affectionate relationship with their fathers, keeping in regular contact with them. Others, though, became resentful that their fathers had left and were no longer there for them. The issue most important to children was not simply one of frequency of contact, but the extent to which the fathers took an interest in them.

Stepfathers were not necessarily accepted as new parental figures straight away. They had to earn their importance in the children's eyes by being caring on an everyday basis. This means that step-parents and other adults adopting this role need to work hard in order to overcome an initial ambivalence which step children often feel towards them. For example, Tracy, a white girl, said that her stepfather was as important to her as her birth father whom she saw frequently because ***'He (stepfather) is still part of my family'*** but then went on to describe her stepfather's involvement in family life in terms of ***'doing loads of things'***, including cooking meals for the family and buying her things.

Several children, all girls, said they felt happy on their mothers' behalf and, in the case of one girl, for lots of other reasons including being a 'handy man'.

'My mum seemed happier. I'm glad my mum is happy and he (stepfather) can fix plugs and everything like, everything really.'

Foster children and their birth parents

Foster children particularly revealed themselves to be very ambivalent about their birth parents. Given the fact that many had been treated very poorly by their parents, these children were caught in a dilemma. While continuing to love their parents, which clearly some did, judging from the affectionate way in which children talked about them, they also had to come to terms with very negative feelings about them and their care. David who had not seen his father since the age of seven said he preferred not to see his mother because her irregular visits upset him too much. Nevertheless, David said that both his mothers and father were important to him because: ***'they are just family and family is important to me.'***

Despite this, foster children frequently identified their birth parents as people who were 'very important' to them. They loved their parents but also felt angry and betrayed by them. Even if the children never or rarely saw their parents, many placed them in the inner circle of significant others which they were asked to complete in their interviews. This suggests that ties with birth parents, even when they are more symbolic than real, remain important to children in the most unpromising circumstances. Having this group of children as part of the study, who had in some sense lost their families, served to illuminate the salience, too often taken for granted, of families to children, and especially the importance of parents and siblings.

Children's family networks

At this important stage of transition, the end of primary school and the beginning of secondary school, most children seemed to be still strongly connected in both practical and emotional senses to their families. This is not surprising since moving to secondary school often disrupted children's friendships and ties with their local communities. Children who had a strong family orientation had not yet felt the need to seek social bonds or activities outside the household unit.

Children's ties with their non-resident families of origin were not generally within their control. In many cases the existing arrangement was unsatisfactory - although, for some, their ties with non-resident parents and siblings did seem to vary over time. While some children had varying degrees of contact with their step- or half-siblings over time, others had never known them. Moreover, family form alone does not explain the variation in children's contact with non-resident parents and non-resident siblings for there is considerable variation within particular family forms. For some children, the experience of family change meant that their active family network extended across several households. They kept in touch with non-resident birth fathers and, at the same time, acquired half siblings and step siblings. Foster children were likely to have siblings scattered across several households.

3. Other important people in children's lives

Significantly, the people children named as most important to them made up an eclectic mix. The list of significant others outside the household was extensive in terms of family, including non-resident parents and siblings but also grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. The connections were inclusive of many outside the family such as friends and other kin, but also often included professionals, such as teachers, who might be considered to have a relatively loose connection with the child.

Siblings

Siblings emerged as having special importance to children in the study. Currently there is very little literature on the importance children place on sibling relationships. They assumed a particularly symbolic role for foster-children who rarely live with all their siblings and often endure very irregular and limited contact with them.

Though many of the sibling relationships clearly involved conflicts, care between siblings was still of overriding value. A deep emotional understanding existed among brothers and sisters in many cases. This meant both that they took each other's problems to heart but also, most importantly, that there was often an empathetic reaction and response. This fits closely with the idea of children as active contributors to care in the household, as found in other aspects of the study. Indeed children gave accounts of older siblings guiding and comforting younger ones.

'I can talk to her [older sister) about things - girls, that I don't want to talk to my mum and dad about. [Even] if I did go out with a girl. But I can talk to her about everything. And if I didn't want her to go blabbering, she wouldn't. She's kind as well.' *(Baldev, South Asian origin boy)*

'If she's (older sister) like having problems at school or with friends, I always tell her to stick up for herself... because I've learnt to respect - to be happy with myself and that I can actually stick up for myself.' *(Latasha)*

Other than in cases when one sibling was under pressure, such as during public examinations, children were reluctant to take on too many responsibilities which were either the parents' or the sibling's responsibility. Children were also careful to say that they did not care for siblings 'by themselves'; responsibility was the job of parents. This was explicable by the common feeling amongst children that childhood should be both a time of freedom and protection.

'When I get home from school, I usually have to look after him (baby brother). Well, I mean, fair enough, mum's had him all day. But it gets a pain because, like, you've been to school all day. You've done all this hard work. And then you have to come home and look after this screaming baby.' *(Amy, white girl)*

Sibling interaction is central in terms of providing role models and mutually developing practical skills, notably in intellectual argument. Indeed, sometimes siblings are a key resource for friendship and having fun, especially when there were several children of roughly the same age in the same household.

A central theme in many children's accounts of sibling relationships was the negotiation of hierarchies based on age and birth order. Sometimes the hierarchy was challenged by younger siblings and sometimes it was maintained by elder siblings. This was particularly important where siblings vied for scarce material privileges or parental attention.

'It's because she thinks – she's older, she's bigger and bossy.' *(Lujayn, South Asian origin, younger sibling)*

'They (parents) just say "I don't want to know. I don't want to hear it. You should know better. You are older." But I don't think older's got nothing to do with it. She starts, I start back on her... I'm not standing for it!' *(Claudia, white girl, older sibling)*

As far as foster children were concerned, having siblings whom they rarely or never saw, did not detract from their importance to them. In the face of discontinuity, siblings represented a continuing source of family roots. They symbolised the family that might have been or used to exist. A foster boy said the postman was one of the most important persons in his life because he brought letters from his brothers.

Grandparents

Grandparents, too, emerged as important figures, especially maternal grandparents. Indeed, contrary to cultural assumptions, Asian origin children were equally likely to mention their maternal grandparents as their paternal ones. However, neither having regular contact nor even living with a grandparent guaranteed that children placed them in their inner circles of significant others. Step-family children, who had the largest family networks on average, stressed the significance of blood ties and rarely included grandparent-type relationships acquired through their step-fathers in their circles of significant others - ***'because I'm not related to them.'*** *(Ben, white boy).*

Grandparents were considered by children to be important, in symbolic, practical and expressive ways. They were required to 'be there' for their grandchildren by providing presents to the extent of spoiling them and by giving practical care, notably when children were young or, in some cases, when their parents' marriage broke down. Grandmothers were depicted as loving, kindly, supportive figures while grandfathers were portrayed in more quirky ways - as funny, jokey or clever.

In return for the special status afforded as a grandchild, children sought to be concerned about and helpful to their grandparents.

'When people get old, they really like children and stuff and we are really special to them. And they spoil us and everything.' *(Ceri, white girl)*

Aunts and uncles

Perhaps more surprising was the generally high regard in which children held relatives - especially their blood-related aunts and uncles. In most cases, they were individually identified and often placed in the inner circle of significance while other, non-related, partners of their aunts and uncles were more likely to be put in the outer circle. Indeed, contact with these relatives was more frequent than with grandparents and non-resident fathers.

Friends

By contrast, the significance children attached to their friends was much more variable. Many children noted that ***'Friends are friends to me'*** *(Lenny, black boy)* and ***'I couldn't pick one out'*** *(Leila, mixed race girl)*. Rather few talked about their best friends. Friendships were almost entirely made with other children of roughly the same age and of the same sex. There was a strong distinction between 'having friends', which brought group inclusion and a sense of social identity, especially for boys, and 'being friends' which provided children with relational resources such as the opportunity to confide, a sense of personal identity and emotional and moral support[2]. Many children also mentioned having 'old friends' some known since nursery, others in their former primary school, because they provided them with a sense of meaning and continuity in their lives.

There were, however, important differences between children's attitudes to friends, depending on their background and family structure. On average, children in two-parent households reported the most friends whilst children in the lone mother group reported the least and only half as many as those with both their parents. For some children, friends were less important than family. This was especially the case for South Asian origin children who were also more likely to spend most of their time with family rather than friends.

'Well (first) it's my family, then it's my relatives, then it's my friends.' *(Baldev, South Asian origin boy)*

'Family are more important because family is always there and friends aren't. They can change overnight but your family doesn't really.' *(Harinder, South Asian origin boy)*

Foster children had a lower than average contact with friends but tended to be overly inclusive of friends in filling out their maps of significant persons, perhaps

[2] James, A (1993) *Childhood Identities: Social relationships and the self in children's experience.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

in order to appear to have plenty of friends. They often included friends they had only just made (one on the day of interview) or friends with whom they were no longer in contact.

Children's friendships were sometimes described as uncertain or insecure, in contrast to family ties which were seen as a great deal more stable. The instability of friendships stemmed from the different contexts across which they were maintained, such as home, school and the wider community and because they could be disrupted by external events, notably the move to secondary school.

As several children across the different family forms suggested, friendships are largely a matter of choice and depend upon the will and whim of others, as well as themselves. At a time when children's social networks were undergoing change, notably during the transition to secondary school, children seemed to consider friendships to be less stable than family relationships. Moreover, families and kin were still preferred and considered more dependable, despite disruption caused by divorce.

Professionals

In some instances children included professionals who delivered public services to them as being important to them, because they played a key role in their lives. Teachers were by the far the most mentioned because they were seen to be helpful to children when they sought to overcome difficulties in learning.

'He was my favourite teacher in the school... If he hadn't been at school, I don't think I would have been that clever... He's told me everything that I really want to know... I could put him as my best friend.' *(Niaz, South Asian origin boy)*

Family doctors were the next most frequently mentioned and were seen to be supportive figures in times of illness. Some foster children mentioned their social workers as people they could turn to for emotional support and so carried a strong significance in their lives.

4. Children as care-givers

Children are active contributors to care and active participants in family life. However, they also view childhood as a time when children should be largely free from work other than schoolwork.

Children and housework

The children agreed that they ought to contribute to housework. As part of a family they thought they should help out. As 'adults in waiting' it helped them to learn for themselves. Children felt, though, that their contribution need only be a modest one. When asked whether they were in favour of payment for household work, there was general agreement that they were not. This was because it undermined the feeling of family mutuality - ***'because it's your own family, you're doing it for your own good'.*** More white children agreed with payment than those of ethnic minority origin.

Caring about others

Children felt much more positive about the idea of 'caring about' than 'caring for' their family. They reported that they frequently made a considerable contribution at home, especially in regard to *caring for* their own needs and self-organisation, but suggested more often that they were generally *caring about* others. The people they cared about and were generally helpful to included classmates, elderly people and pets as well as mothers, fathers and siblings.

Children showed considerable ability in understanding other people's feelings and circumstances. Some of the children expressed a strong appreciation of what their parents had done for them and wanted to reciprocate often in a caring sense as well as in terms of practical help.

'It gives me a chance to do something for my parents instead of them doing things for me' *(One girl wrote on her questionnaire)*

'It's not fair. They go out to work all day, then they have to come home and do everything for you.' *(Anna, white girl)*

Mothers as primary recipients of children's care

Whilst the children often mentioned in passing moments of care, it was their mothers as the receivers of care from their children who dwelt upon the impact it had upon them. They emphasised the depth of children's emotional intelligence and the support that they offered. The mothers had clearly been surprised by their children's ability to read their moods and respond supportively towards them.

They drew considerable comfort from children's symbolic gestures such as being made a cup of tea at the right moment and in times of stress and crisis. Just as mothers sought to provide their children with support, so children wanted to

reciprocate. As one boy noted, mothers are 'there' for children, so children seek to 'be there' for their parents.

'She is like a companion to me, like a close friend, where you talk, discuss. She understands you, your feelings and all that.' *(Mother of Zarina, South Asian origin girl)*

When mothers were asked whether children should be expected to be privy to parents' problems, such as relationship and financial ones, there was no tangible consensus among them. Indeed, many contradicted earlier statements of their children's support by suggesting that they thought children should not be burdened.

This reluctance to burden children with adult problems fits with the more general view of childhood as a protected time when children should be free from stress.

'I don't think they should learn too quick. They should still have their childhood.' *(Mother of Scott, white boy)*

Lone mothers and their children were more in favour of discussing serious problems than other mothers. While some mothers argued that children should be 'entitled' to their childhoods, similarly some children said they were 'not old enough' to know adults' problems. Some other children suggested that personal matters were simply 'confidential'. By contrast, other children considered that children needed to know in order to be prepared when their parents had marriage or financial problems.

5. Children and parental control

'You can't love your child if you don't discipline them'

Care and control may be seen as two sides of the same coin: for the parents, regulation of children can be seen as the practical ways in which they care about and for children while, from the perspective of children being regulated, care may be interpreted as the exercise of control. Just as care is negotiated, so children were seen (by both mothers and children) to need general boundaries to 'guide' behaviour rather than hard and fast rules to 'govern' behaviour.

Mothers' attitudes to parental regulation

'You need to have some form of control, not in a bad way, where you restrict them from doing everything, but there have to be guidelines.' *(Black mother, two-parent family)*

In principle, mothers said they were against strictness. The word was seen to carry authoritarian connotations and suggested disempowering children. The justification given for the rules which mothers put in place was varied. Some sought simply to check their child's anarchic tendencies but others felt that children needed to be made ready for the outside world of rules. Sole-carer mothers particularly felt this need. Mothers sought to describe their approach as child-oriented and most thought it was important to listen to children's views and wishes. They trod a tightrope between wanting their children to learn to regulate their own behaviour but felt the need to take some control for the child's own safety.

'I am strict by my children's definition because I love them... You can't love your child if you don't discipline them...You can't tell your children you love them if you are not prepared to look out for them.' *(Marsha's mother, black, step-family).*

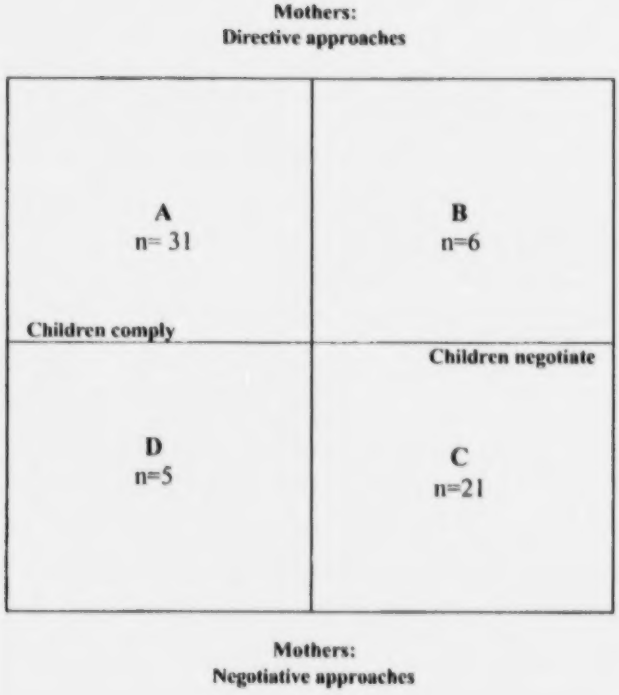
Different styles of mothers' control

'As a female I find they listen to you less.' *(Black lone mother).*

According to both children's and parents' accounts, there were differences in emphasis between the modes of control which mothers adopted. Though all mothers claimed to listen to children, they did not necessarily follow their views in practice. Some mothers portrayed themselves as 'directive' and having the major say, while others presented themselves as negotiating with their children. There were differences depending upon family structure, as both foster-carers and mothers in two-parent families were more likely to be directive in their parenting, while lone-mothers and step-family mothers were equally likely to adopt either approach (see Figure 1 below).

'I am mum, I do as I please.' *(Willy's mother, white, lone mother).*

Figure 1



Children's responses to parental regulation

Children generally accepted their mothers' views of, and approaches to, discipline - compliant children matched directive mothers and negotiative children matched negotiative mothers (see diagram). Where mothers were directive, most children described their parents as fair and reasonable. However, some children suggested that they had, in fact, internalised their parents' rules. There were relatively few cases where mothers' and children's accounts suggest a lack of congruence (cells B and D in diagram).

This strong congruence is powerful evidence of mothers and children speaking from the same script, whatever the causes of this may be. It is possible, though, that mothers who saw themselves as negotiative were either genuinely so, or their apparently liberal attitude could mask a more covert form of control. In situations where children seemed to have autonomy, even though they said there were no obvious rules, they may, in fact, act according to their reading of their parents' expectations. In such cases, parental regulation was not absent but implicit. This might especially be the case where rules were in place but unspoken.

6. Conclusions from the research

Overall, this study provides some clear messages about how children view and experience family life. The children in the study did not present themselves as commentators *on* their lives nor did they often give detailed narratives of their past experiences. Children were living *in* their lives and getting on with the business of changing schools and negotiating their everyday routines. The story of family life which the study offers is a between-the-lines story based on children's often elliptical reports.

Children's criteria for family life included: the presence of children, living with at least one parent, a sense of security and a place to belong, and most important of all, being able to give children unconditional love and care. These were far more important considerations than the type of family they lived in. Childless couples were seen as 'families in waiting': as long as one parent was present it was a 'proper family'.

Children are strongly child-oriented, asserting the centrality of children to family life and the need to prioritise the interests, needs and concerns of children. They thought parents should listen to them more, include them in family decisions and support them in their role as school children.

In return, children felt they should help their parents, but only a little. They were less concerned with parents' paid work than that their parents should be 'there for them'. Children provide a modest amount of household and practical help 'caring for' family members but contribute rather more in terms of 'caring about' others. Contrary to typical views of childhood, mothers and children provided examples of children's emotional intelligence - understanding their mothers' feelings and offering support at just the right time.

The gender of the parents was less important to children than that both their parents should give them time and attention.

Children are active co-participants in care and co-constructors in family life. Like adults, they make sense of rules which guide caring behaviour and apply them diplomatically. They are also highly able to understand and reciprocate their parents' care.

Children showed themselves to be pragmatic towards family change and accepting of different family forms, so long as parents (at least one) provide them with love and affection. Thus they have highly inclusive and loose definitions as to what constitutes a family. They make sense of family change such as divorce, but are not forthcoming about this area in their encounters with researchers.

Children place great importance on relations with family and especially siblings at this point in their lives while friendships are subject to flux during the transition to secondary school. Siblings were almost as important to children as birth parents, even when absent or unknown, symbolising the family 'that might have been' when families had broken down. Other important people were grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. They also emphasised a wide range of kin beyond the household including relatives, pets, friends and professionals.

Children thought adults were frequently disrespectful of them, disregarding their presence in public places and ignoring them when making decisions that affected them.

Almost all children felt they should have some say in major family decisions, notably divorce.

Appendix

The schools questionnaire survey

The survey targeted 10-12 year-olds in their first year of secondary school and their last year of primary school. It was administered in 12 mixed sex state schools in 2 South London Local Authorities - in 3 secondary schools and 9 'feeder' primary schools. The schools were chosen for their representation of substantial proportions of South Asian origin children and Black children. Because of the educational policies of 'parental choice' in the late 1990s, state secondary schools in London contain disproportionate numbers of working class children, albeit one of the 3 secondary schools was 'grant maintained' and drew its intake from a wider catchment area than the other two secondary schools.

The questionnaire was administered between January and March 1997 by the research team during curriculum time. The achieved sample of 941 children - 349 in the last year of primary school and 592 in the first year of secondary school - represents an 88 per cent response rate; 9 per cent of non-responses was due to absence. Children of South Asian origin were much less evenly distributed across the schools than were Black children and white children. There were also school differences by sex, with significantly fewer girls in the secondary schools and a reverse situation in the primary schools. The differences between the three secondary schools were greater than between the primary and secondary schools. Overall, the survey is biased in favour of boys (54% versus 46% of girls). Half the sample classified themselves as being of white UK origin (49%), 25 per cent as Black African or Black Caribbean, 17 per cent as South Asian origin, and 10 per cent as 'other' (notably as 'mixed race'). (Table 1) Two thirds lived in two parent families at the time of the survey (24%, of whom 93% were lone mothers), 9 per cent in step families, and 2 per cent (15 children) were living with grand parents or were in foster care. (Tables 2 and 3) With respect to household type and parental employment, the survey sample was broadly similar to the relevant national population. However, whether we focus on mothers? or fathers? occupations, the survey was disproportionately working class. (Table 4)

The case studies

The case study sample was chosen from the survey sample. We sought to select three groups of children to interview: 16 living with lone mothers, 16 living in step father families and 16 living in two parent households. Each group was to be equally divided between boys and girls, with a spread of social class and ethnic backgrounds. A separate group of children in foster care was sought from two South London social services departments. Only children who had been in care for at least two years were to be included.

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The case study interviews were carried out (separately) with children and mothers between September 1997 and February 1998. The response rate for the lone mother group was 75%, 71% for the two parent group, and 65% for the step family group. It is difficult to estimate the 'true' response rate for the foster care group because access was controlled by social services departments[2]. The final sample of 63 children (31 girls and 32 boys) and their mothers / foster carers included: 15 children in two parent households, 18 children in lone mother households, 15 children in step father families, and 15 children in foster care. The sample included 12 South Asian origin children of whom 9 were in two parent households. It included 17 Black children of whom six were in lone mother families and four were in step families. There were in addition 5 mixed race children and 29 white children. In the two parent group, there was one pair of siblings and two pairs in the foster care group. Like the survey sample, the case study sample was disproportionately working class.

Table 1 Children's household type by children's ethnic origin
Questionnaire Survey (N=891)

Household	Asian %	Black %	White %	Other %	Total %
Two-parent	90	47	68	61	66
One parent	8	40	20	31	24
Stepparent	1	11	11	5	9
Other	1	2	1	3	1
All	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

significant difference p<0.001 (chi-square test)

Table 2 Resident mothers' employment
Questionnaire Survey (N=837)

Employment status	Asian	Black	White	Other	Total
Full-time	35%	38%	32%	18%	33%
Part-time	20%	26%	27%	35%	27%
Paid job	5%	5%	9%	8%	7%
Nonemployed	40%	31%	32%	39%	34%

significant difference p<0.00 (chi-square test)

[4] Heptinstall, E (2000) 'Research Note: Gaining access to looked after children for research purposes: lessons learned' *British Journal of Social Work, 30*, 865-870

Table 3 Resident fathers' employment

Questionnaire Survey (N=652)

Employment status	Asian	Black	White	Other	Total
Full-time	70%	71%	68%	63%	69%
Part-time	10%	16%	14%	19%	14%
Paid job	3%	1%	4%	4%	3%
Nonemployed	17%	12%	14%	14%	14%

differences not significant (chi-square test)

Table 4 Occupational classification (Registrar General) of resident fathers and mothers

Questionnaire Survey

Occupational status	Fathers N=505	Mothers n=493
I and II Professional and managerial	32%	34%
IIINM Clerical etc	15%	31%
IIIM Skilled manual	42%	8%
IV and V Semi-skilled and unskilled	10%	27%

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